13/ To Dr. John Torrey.

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Dear Sir,

To which of your species of Ranunculus does the accompanying specimen belong? It is frequently brought into my office, by my students.

William Zelly.

New Haven. 24. July. 1840

APR 4 - 1907

Given by A. M. VAIL. from the J. J. Crooke Collection

TORREY CORRESPONDENCE
HERBARIUM 1840
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY.

Newhaven (Ct.) Saturday Oct. 3rd 1840

My dear Sir,

Your obliging letter of 20th ult. reached me in due time, i.e. two days after its date. I should not think of again trespassing upon time of Dr Torrey's far better occupied, than by any communications that I can make, were it not due to myself to say that one of my letters to you has certainly miscarried, since I did not by any means omit to reply to your proposition in regard to the Materia medica of the U. S. & its botanical history. Although my recollection is very distinct in regard to the fact that I made a reply, yet I do not trust to this alone. I have long been in the habit of indorsing "answered" upon all my letters, whenever I dispatched one, in reply; and since the year, that I spent with some friends at the South, I have been in the habit of indorsing the date of my reply. Your letter has only the similar indorsement "answered". I am often surprised at many miscarriages of letters. Sometimes several years, during which there is no reason for supposing that a single individual of my letters is lost, & again, within a very short time, several letters will be lost, either to, or from the same person. But, I very well recollect the substance of my reply. I made several inquiries about the proper manner of execution of such a work, — stated that I should be able to contribute nothing towards a work of this sort, except an account of the medicinal powers, operations, & therapeutic applications of the several articles, — claiming that, in all probability, I had studied these points, in regard to as many indigenous plants, as any person in our country; but that I had undertaken a research only in my general results, not reaching one, or particular cases. I stated that very many of my results & conclusions differed from the prevalent notions of the profession, & that this diversity of views had been very displeasing to the medical gentlemen, by whom I am surrounded, & had seen made a ground of obloquy in regard to myself & my labors. To give a plain illustration. Long before I ever heard of Samuel Thomson, or what is now called Thomsonism, I had very thoroughly investigated the powers, operations, & effects of Lobelia inflata. According to my results, this article could not be considered, or admitted to be a narcotic. But the medical profession have adopted the notion that Lobelia inflata is a very dangerous narcotic poison, not safe to be employed in medicine. Therefore my researches in regard to our indigenous Materia medica are not worthy of the least confidence, & therefore the truth is always the reverse of my conclusions. Come back my reports on indigenous Materia medica rejected by the regular physicians, because they contravened vague prevalent opinion among the profession, & more particularly because my accounts of the powers & operations of articles differed from what is set forth in the great medical schools of Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Boston, etc. Since I went to Baltimore, I have received an offer to lecture, & questioned whether such a work could be published, without involving the author in responsibilities of some sort or other, that would be inconvenient. I have stated my conviction that no author could possibly be worse off, from such a work, & I have satisfied myself entirely that from the least anxiety, neither this, but, on the contrary, I think that I must certainly achieve a pecuniary profit of myself individually, should I never think of

undertaking such a work. I cannot however with any expression of disapprobation, which I most heartily pass for your judgement & opinion; & express my readiness to submit to your inspection specimens of such performances, as I shall be able to furnish, if you want more than one, or two, or more topics, that you might better judge of the expediency of attempting such a work. My reply was something like this, — at least as near as I can now recollect.

Since I came to New Haven, I have never had any employment in my profession. The whole practice of medicine, in New Haven, is monopolized by a combination or clique of brothers-in-law, & their sons, who know how to keep everything in their own hands, — if not by any other means, at least by the disparagement, & even slander of every one at all in their way. While connected with the College, I received only about $212. or $220. a year from it. Perhaps, the maximum sum that I ever got from the apothecaries' division, was only $300. a year, while the minimum was $200. After I got here, I found that I had been selected for the purpose of keeping another man out, whom they would otherwise have been obliged to take, & who would have been much more in the way, than I was likely to be. The first moment there was any chance of getting a man of their own clique, into the place, that I occupied I was pretty nearly shouldered off; but, their man failed of getting the appointment. They were finally obliged to accept a former private pupil of mine, who was ambitious of the distinction of the place, but whom they have succeeded in keeping entirely out of business. In the meantime, I have been obliged to obtain my support by a kind of schoolmasterization, since the length of time, that I have resided in New Haven, without any productive employment, & with such a large amount of ill-health, and indeed severe sickness in my family, has exhausted my previous resources. Now, I instruct a few in Civil, in any thing, in which instruction is required, — Latin & Greek, English Grammar, Chemistry, Botany, etc. My botanical pupils are not such as you vs. All that they desire, (or, at least all that they will undertake,) is to acquire just so much knowledge of the subject, as to be able to ascertain the name, by which dealers treat of such plants, as happen to fall in their way, that they may learn from books, what powers such plants are known to possess, & to what uses, they may have been put, in the various arts, etc. My pupils are either a few young ladies, — florists perhaps, — who desire a mere smattering of botany to enable them to ascertain the names of the plants that they cultivate; or, they are medical students, who have just left the plough, or some mechanical employment, & without any previous education, except such as has been obtained in a common free school, in some country district, & who will never know any thing more of medicine, than can be acquired, by attending lectures, about twelve weeks, for two years in succession, at an institution perhaps, where they are told, almost daily, "gentlemen, there are no principles in medicine; you must learn to guess well!" Now, it is quite an accomplishment, in such a man, to be able to determine the name, by which a given indigenous plant may be mentioned in the books of materia-medica, & on the other hand to be able to determine

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whether a given plant, recent which he may happen to have read, grows in the vicinity of his immediate residence. Every summer, I have numerous applications, to instruct students (such as they are) to find about this extent; & every summer numbers relinquish the attempt to acquire even this small amount of knowledge, or have recourse to such books, as they are willing to try to use. I have this summer been applied to, in behalf of the pupils of a boarding school for young ladies; but, they would not even attempt to use Wood's Book. I have, several times, produced a thorough & absolute rout of quite a little army of botanical students, on attempting to instruct them, by a natural system. I think I shall never attempt such a thing again. But, I have never had any such difficulty, when using the Linnean method. It is all a small business, however, & I never should have mentioned it, if I had not been out of employment. It is true, I was always fond of the cultivation of Natural History generally, but much more especially botany; but, with us, a man must be independent as respects pecuniary affairs, in order to be able to indulge in it. In the struggle & contest for employment, in the profession of medicine, a taste for the study of Natural History will certainly be urged against him, & prejudices will be the consequence.

Were I to advise a young man, in regard to his best course, for the purpose of getting the best living, by the practice of physic, I should say most certainly eschew all reputation for any thing commonly called science.

I buy no books, of late, but, by perfect accident, I happen to have here Lindley's Vegetable Kingdom, Lond. 1846, upon my table, for a little more than a month. It appears to me to be very valuable in its own way.

I suppose that I have been well acquainted with Cornus sericea, for at least thirty years; also, at about the same time, with Cornus circinata. I think also that I know equally well Cornus stolonifera (Michaux), in fact, at the eye, I was in the habit of calling Cornus stolonifera, till you & Dr. Gray's Work corrected me. I supposed also that I knew Cornus paniculata, & Cornus alternifolia equally well, till quite lately. Cornus stricta (Lam.) & Cornus asperifolia (Michaux), I never suspected that I knew. For many years now, both, as well as the present, I have delighted to conclude myself less wise than I supposed; for, about the first of June (certainly, for three years), I have had a Cornus brought to me, in blossom, with no other leaves, than a whorl of five, at the bottom of the common peduncle of the cyme, which agrees with the Cornus alternifolia, as you & Dr. Gray describe it, in all respects, except the position of the leaves, & does not agree with your description of any other species. Do the branches which produce the cymes at their extremity, subsequently elongate, so as to render the whorl of leaves alternate? Their petioles are never attached exactly to the brink of the same plane of the stem, but only so near as just to warrant calling the leaves in a whorl. The branches are alternate, with "a smooth yellowish-green bark, generally streaked with a long whitish spot". The flowers are of a "cream color". In the flowering season the leaves are oval, but not broad-oval, & acuminate. They are "glaucous above, the lower surface whitish, & pubescent with a minute appressed pubescence". I also consider recollect the species does not appear like what I be merely called Cornus alternifolia. I have, long since, given away my specimens. The random remarks I, should in the same vein, is not in this quarter, to bring it, when

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in reality, new to me. Time in our height of the sex, is it. However, this matter is a little consequence to me at present. In fact I have no interest in Natural History as well as Botany, but I was led to examine its necessity, in some way, except very small elementary instruction in it. Do you not consider Mr. Ward's Book as containing a good many inaccuracies? It seems to me to be so. I should be glad to have a copy of your Botany of New York, but, I shall probably never see it. I have very little respect for the method, in which our numerous governments manage such matters. I have not seen St. de Lisle's intro. to Bot. &, in all probability never shall. I consider myself as having done with medicine, & natural history like wise; and if I find that any enlightenment intervals distinct from either, I would never again desert a thought upon the former. Though, I think I shall always be inclined to cherish what little knowledge of the latter still remains to me. Formerly I have been very strongly interested in Chemistry; & after the publication of Thomson's last edition of his Vegeta. Organ. Chem. I carefully examined his chaos of compounds, described in that work, & flattered myself that I had found out a method, by which the whole may be reduced to a few exactly analogous groups, subgroups, etc.

I feel obligated to inform you that I did not omit to reply to your proposition, made long ago, but when I begin, I did contemplate in writing so much upon you. I shall nevertheless forward it, just as it is, & forbear writing it over fair.

I remain yours very truly & very highest respects.

William Suckley.

Prof. J. Torrey, M. D.
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